DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 711 EA 016 478

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TITLE How Successful Federal and Provincial Politicians Evaluate Their School Board Experience as a Political Apprenticeship.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Board Candidates; Elementary Secondary Education; *Political Attitudes; *Political Influences; *Political Socialization; Trustees
IDENTIFIERS British Columbia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the value of school board experience as a political apprenticeship for a group of 10 politicians in Canada who went on to successful careers in the House of Commons or the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. Structured indepth interviews focused on the study's principal concerns: political socialization, political recruitment, and political apprenticeship. Findings show that the majority of the respondents came from politically active families and underwent early political socialization. Six of the respondents were recruited to run for the school board by others (three by parents, friends, and neighbors; two by mayors; and one by a ratepayers' association). The other four respondents initiated their own candidacies. For nine of the respondents, election to the school board started their political careers. For all 10 of the respondents, the school board experience was an invaluable political apprenticeship, which developed such political skills as coalition building, conflict resolution, assessment of expert evidence, and financial management. The study calls for further research to examine whether the political experiences of less successful school board members differ markedly from those discussed in this study. (PB)

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HOW SUCCESSFUL FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL POLITICIANS EVALUATE THEIR SCHOOL BOARD EXPERIENCE AS A POLITICAL APPRENTICESHIP

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

New Orleans, Louisiana April, 1984

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HOW SUCCESSFUL FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL POLITICIANS EVALUATE THEIR SCHOOL BOARD EXPERIENCE AS A POLITICAL APPRENTICESHIP

Perspectives

Researchers have given little attention to investigating the value of the school board experience as a political apprenticeship for those individuals who leave the school board and go on to higher political office. The reason for this neglect probably lies in the fact that the great majority of school board members do not have political ambitions above the school board level. For example, Ziegler, Jennings & Peak (1974) found that only 7% of incumbent school board members had upward-bound political aspirations. In an earlier study which investigated the reasons why people run for school board, McCarty (1959) found that less then 10% of school board candidates listed future political advancement as a motive for running. In a replication of the McCarty study done in British Columbia, McDonald (1972) found a similarly small percentage of candidates running to further their political careers.

The question of how many school board members actually do go on to higher political office has not been thoroughly researched. The evidence that does exist suggests that probably more school board members in Canada move on to higher political office than is the case in the United States. For example, Schlesinger (1966) found little local government experience of any kind in the backgrounds of candidates for governorships and the U.S. Senate. In Canada, on the other hand, studies (Kornberg, 1967; Kornberg & Mishler, 1976; Kornberg, Smith & Clarke, 1979) done on

the backgrounds of members of the House of Commons reveal considerable experience in local government.

Neither the American or Canadian studies cited isolate school board experience from other forms of local government experience. As a result, no complete and accurate information exists on how many former school board members have gone on to higher political office in the United States or Canada. An inspection of the most recent Canadian parliamentary guide (Normandin, 1982) does reveal, however, that 23 of the present 282 members of the House of Commons are former school board members. About ten percent of the members of the provincial legislatures are former board members. Ontario, for example, has 17 former school trustees in its 125 member house.

Little is also known about school board members who seek higher politicial office but are unsuccessful in their efforts. No complete and accurate information on this question has as yet been assembled. A recent study by Stacey (1983) did document, however, the number of school board members who offered themselves for election in the Canadian federal election in British Columbia in 1979 and in the British Columbia provincial elections in 1979 and 1983. In the federal election in B. C. a total of six former school board members sought election to B. C.'s 28 seats in the House of Commons. Three of these former school board members were successful and became M. P.s. In the provincial election of 1979 there were 16 former school trustees seeking election to the 57 seats in the B. C. legislature. Four of these former trustees were successful in winning seats. In the 1983 B. C. provincial election, 13 former trustees sought election and four were successful.

What becomes clear is that a small but important number of former school board members are successful in their quest for higher political office. Some of these former board members later rise to fill high level political offices.

The Research Question

The research question that this study attempted to ivestigate can be stated as follows: How do successful politicians who began their political careers as school board members and who have gone on to higher political office at the federal or provincial level evaluate their school board experience in terms of its value as a political apprenticeship?

In studying this question an attempt was also made to examine the political antecedents of the school board experiences of the politicians studied. That is, an examination was made of the political socialization experiences and the political recruitment experiences leading up to the politicians' school board experiences.

Methods

The Sample

The population for this study consisted of all former school board members who are serving or have served in the House of Commons or the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. In spite of a rather thorough search of the Canadian parliamentary guides over the past five years, it was not possible to identify the exact size of this population and to come up with an appropriate sampling procedure. As a result, a decision was made to simply interview all those who could be contacted and

who were willing to be interviewed. In the end, this turned out to be ten people.

In research terms, this sample of ten politicians is very much an accidental sample. It is not a random sample. The sample does possess, however, great diversity in terms of political characteristics which reflects the reality of political life in B. C. This sample of ten politicians had the following

Ten federal and provincial politicians from British Columbia who were once school board members were the subjects of this study. This sample of ten politicians had the following characteristics: (1) it contained representatives from all four political parties currently active in B.C. There were four New Democrats, two Liberals, two Progressive Conservatives, and two Social Crediters; (2) five of the politicians had service in the House of Commons; four had service in the B.C. Legislature; and one had service in both; (3) three of the politicians had service in either a federal or provincial cabinet; (4) three of the politicians had retired from politics; seven were still active; (5) four of the politicians had served only on the government side; three only on the opposition side; and three had served on both sides of the house; (6) there were eight men and two women; and (7) the period of service in political office at the federal or provincial level ranged from a low of two years to a high of 26 years.

Interviews

Structured in-depth interviews were used in this study. The interview schedule employed asked questions regarding the

political socialization, political recruitment and political apprenticeship dimensions of this study. The principal questions were as follows:

1. What were the important factors in the early <u>political socialization</u> of these politicians?

   (a) Did they come from politically active families?

   (b) If so, did any of their parents or close relatives run for or hold public office?

   (c) When did these politicians become politically active? High school? University? Later?

   (d) What was the form and extent of their political activity prior to their school board service?

2. What were the important factors in the <u>political recruitment</u> process that lead up to their school board service?

   (a) Had they held or contested public office prior to their school board service?

   (b) Were they active or nonactive in community affairs? If active, was it in political/governmental, civic/business or educational spheres?

   (c) Were they teachers by profession or did they have close relatives in the teaching profession?

   (d) Were they approached to run for school board or were their candidacies self-initiated? If approached, by what individual or groups? If by groups, were the groups formal or informal?

   (e) What were their motivations for seeking election to the school board? Were their candidacies stimulated by issue differences with incumbent board members? If not, what other motives played a part in their quests for school board seats?

3. In what ways can service on a school board be considered a political apprenticeship for higher public office?

(a) What political skills did they acquire as a result of their school board experiences?

(b) As a result of their school board experiences, were these politicians stimulated to seek further public office? Did their school board service stir their political ambitions? Did it have a politicizing effect on them?

(c) Did their perceived sense of accomplishment as a school board member affect their desire to seek further public office?

(d) If they suffered electoral defeat, did this have an effect on their desire to seek further public office?

(e) Did their school board experience make them desirable to political parties as potential federal or provincial candidates?

Results

Early Political Socialization

In political science research, political socialization is usually viewed as the process by which an individual acquires political values, attitudes, and interests. In addition, the individual acquires a knowledge of the political community with its institutions and actors. From childhood onward political socialization is a continuous process with the individual being placed under constant potential change through the influence of family, peers, school and other sources.

What was important in this study was to first determine what factors played a significant part in the early political

socialization of the ten politicians studied. Secondly, it was important to assess the effect that these socialization experiences had on the initiation and development of the political careers of these ten individuals.

Findings. Family experiences played an important part in the early political socialization of eight of the ten politicians. Only two of the politicians came from families where there was not an active interest in politics. In the other eight situations, an interest in politics was characteristic of family life. Typical of the comments describing the family situation were the following:

> My parents were both very active politically. They talked politics at the dinner hour... so I grew up with it.

> My father and mother were both actively involved in politics. My mother mainly in a supportive role, my father mainly in the union, as president of his local. He was deeply involved in union politics, and as I said, ran for alderman in the city.

In four of the ten situations, the politicians came from family situations where a parent or close relative had held public office.

> I came from a very political family. My father was a Tory and he served on the school board too. The old time Tories used to meet at our house with my father and I used to love to hear them talk.

> My father was on the school board for several years. He was chairman. Later he was elected to the House of Commons.

The interviews with the politicians revealed as well that the majority of them (six of the ten) were politically active in a formal party way well before their entry into school board affairs. For a few, the entry into formal party activity came in adolescence. For others, entry came after high school, usually in university. Typical of the experiences described are these three comments:

> My first public experience was when I was in grade eight and I was asked to give the toast to the graduating class. From then on I became active in student council affairs in high school. I joined the C.C.F. at a very young age...so at the age of fourteen or fifteen I was attending political meetings.
>
> I had been involved in the Liberal Party since university days and followed through afterwards...I remained an active member and was president of a very small local at the time I became a school trustee.
>
> My father ran for alderman a number of times...and I delivered campaign literature for him. I joined the party after that. So I've always been involved in politics in some way, at university and elsewhere. At the time I ran for trustee I was president of the local N.D.P. club.

Discussion. The findings of this study reveal quite clearly that the majority of the politicians interviewed came from politically active families. In most cases, politics was part of family life and in nearly half the families, either a parent or close relative had held public office.

These findings support the findings of other studies which show that the level of political interest and activity is much higher in the families of future politicians than is the case among members of the general public. A study by Kornberg and Mishler (1976) of Canada's 28th Parliament (1972-1974) showed that nearly two-thirds of the M.P.'s had fathers with a strong interest in politics and 38% had mothers with a similar high level of interest. Furthermore, Clark, Price and Krause (1976), in a study of provincial legislators in all ten Canadian provinces, found that 35% had parents or other relatives who had held public elective office.

What the findings of this study do not support is the conclusion of Zeigler, Jennings and Peak (1974) that school board members do not come from politicized family backgrouds. Their study of 490 school board members in 83 American school

districts showed that only one-third of the board members came from families where the father was "very much interested" in politics and only one-fifth of board members put their mothers in that category.

What is quite clear from the findings of this study is that the overwhelming majority of these future school board members underwent early political socialization experiences that were strong and pervasive. What is not clear is whether most individuals who seek school board membership have similar kinds of political socialization experiences. Are strong and pervasive early political socialization experiences found only in the backgrounds of board members whose political ambitions become upward-bound (i.e. oriented to attaining higher political office) or are they found as well in the backgrounds of board members whose political ambitions remain office-bound (i.e. restricted to the school board)?

What is also not clear is whether there are differences between Canada and the United States in terms of the political socialization experiences that prospective office seekers undergo prior to standing for election to a school board.

Political Recruitment to the School Board

The fact that an individual comes from a highly politicized family environment and has strong and pervasive political experiences in youth and early adulthood does not mean that an individual will embark on a political career. In any society there are thousands of individuals who come from highly politicized backgrounds but only a few ever stand for public office. Thus, Milbrath (1965) and Bowman and Boynton (1966) suggest

that future political actors have to cross a political activity threshold. They have to be stimulated to stand for public office either through the encouragement of others or through the arousal of their own inner feelings. This crossing of the political activity threshold constitutes the process of political recruitment. In this study, the focus was on what factors were important in the political recruitment process that lead up to service on the school board by these politicians.

Findings. For nine of the ten politicians election to the school board constituted the beginning of their political careers. Only one of the politicians had prior experience in a public elective office.

Prior to their election to school board, three of the politicians were nonactive in community affairs. The remaining seven had a varied pattern of community activity. In their study of school board members, Zeigler, Jennings & Peak (1974) examined the community activities of members prior to their election to office. These researchers classified the community activities into three categories: (1) civic/business activities (i.e. involvement in service clubs or business groups); (2) political/governmental activities (i.e. political party involvement or service on public boards); and (3) educational activities (i.e. involvement in educational affairs as a teacher, administrator, or member of a parent-teacher group). Quite clearly these are not discrete categories and it is not possible to categorize the community activities of the individuals in this study into three tidy areas. It was possible, however, to identify from the interviews what the primary focus of these politicians' community activities was. For the seven who were

active in community activities, two can be classified as civic/business actives, and five as political/governmental actives. None could be classified as an educational active in spite of the fact that three of the actives were former school teachers. In all three of these cases, the individuals involved had a long history of political involvement and party membership before they entered teaching.

A number of writers (Zeigler, Jennings & Peak, 1974; Goldhammer, 1964) have pointed out that a disproportionally high number of school board members come from "education" families, that is, families where parents or relatives are employed in educational positions. This is certainly true of this study. As has been noted already, three of the politicians were themselves former teachers. An additional politician had been an educational administrator. Four other politicians had close relatives in educational positions. This meant that only two of the ten politicians had no personal or family involvement in education.

In terms of their recruitment to stand for election to school board, the politicians interviewed were asked to name persons or groups who encouraged their candidacies. Six of the politicians were approached and encouraged to run. The other four politicians indicated that their candidacies were self-initiated. Of the six who were approached, three were approached by informal groups (parents, friends, neighbours); two were approached by political leaders (mayors in both cases); and one was approached by a formal group (ratepayers' association).

Issue differences with the incumbent school board played an important role in stimulating the school board candidacies

of six of the ten politicians interviewed. One of the politicians whose candidacy was self-initiated said:

> I was always very vocal, it was part of my background. And one day I was sitting in the staff room complaining about the school board and somebody said, "You should get on that school board and then maybe you would stop complaining so much about it." So after I left teaching I decided to run for trustee. I became a trustee because there were things going on in education in our district that I didn't like.

Four of the ten politicians who decided to run for school board did not have, however, issue differences with the incumbent board members. Their reasons were often highly personal. One said:

> After the (federal) election, six of us sat around and conducted a post mortem on why we hadn't been able to get anyone elected. I suggested that we should start seeking municipal office...so that we would have a track record that would indicate that we could hack public life....So I decided to run for school board and eventually I became an M.P.... I planned a career in politics, beginning with the school trusteeship.

Kornberg & Mishler (1976) did an analysis of the motives of candidates who sought office and were successful in becoming M. P.s in the Canadian federal election of 1972. Although there was much overlap in categories, they found that the candidates were motivated by the following (in order of importance): (1) "good government" considerations; (2) ideological considerations; (3) "challenge of office" considerations; (4) party pressure; and (5) pressure from others.

In this study the six candidates who were approached to run for school board tended to have different motives for running than the four individuals whose candidacies were self-initiated. The motives of the six approached candidates could be roughly categorized as follows: (1) pressure from others (three candidates); (2) "good government" considerations (two candidates) and (3) ideological considerations (one candidate). For the four self-

initiated candidates, the breakdown on motives is as follows: (1) "challenge of office" considerations (three candidates); and (2) ideological considerations (one candidate).

Discussion. The pattern of political recruitment to school board service for the individuals in this study differs considerably from the pattern of recruitment for school board members reported elsewhere (Goldhammer, 1964; Jennings & Zeigler, 1971; Cistone, 1974; Zeigler, Jennings & Peak (1974). The two most extensive studies of the political recruitment of school board members are that of Cistone (1974), done in Ontario; and that of Zeigler, Jennings & Peak (1974), done in the U. S. A. on a nation-wide basis.

An exact comparison cannot be made between this study and the earlier Canadian (Cistone) and American (Zeigler, Jennings & Peak)

An exact comparison cannot be made between these three studies because each study did not ask the same questions in all areas. The limited comparisons that can be done, however, do reveal certain important differences between the results of this study and the results of the earlier studies of Cistone and Zeigler, Jennings & Peak. In terms of political recruitment to the school board, the results of this study show a higher level of political/governmental activity in the community prior to school board service; more self-initiated candidacies; no encouragement to run from incumbent school board members or professional educators; and more issue differences with incumbent board members.

The only major similarity in the results of this study and the results of the Cistone and Zeigler, Jennings & Peak studies is that all three studies show that school board members are drawn predominately from "education" families. Over 80% of board members

in all three studies had relatives in education and a sizeable minority of board members had once been professional educators.

One finding of this study that deserves particular comment relates to the total absence of any activity on the part of incumbent school board members to approach or encourage potential candidates to run for office. A number of writers (Crain, 1968; Goldhammer, 1964; Jennings & Zeigler, 1971; Tucker & Zeigler, 1980) have noted that there is a strong tendency on the part of school boards to perpetuate themselves. This is done by encouraging the candidacies of carefully selected individuals. In this study, none of the politicians interviewed indicated that they received any support or encouragement from incumbent school board members to run for office.

School Board Service as a Political Apprenticeship

In this study an attempt was made to determine whether school board experience served as a political apprenticeship for the successful federal and provincial politicians studied, and if so, in what ways was the experience valuable to them.

Findings. All ten politicians were of the strong opinion that their school board experience was an invaluable political apprenticeship. For all but one of the politicians, service on the school board was their first experience in public office and for them it was a powerful and mind-expanding experience. As one of the politicians described it:

> I look back on my school board years as one of the most interesting and stimulating times of my life. It was my first entrance into politics and everything was to my mind so exciting. I was almost overwhelmed with the fact that I had been given the opportunity to sit on the board and to make decisions.

The politicians mentioned certain particular skills that they acquired as a result of their school board experience. Foremost among these were skills in dealing with people, particularly in the areas of coalition building and conflict resolution. One of the politicians put it this way:

> You may have the best ideas in the world as a school trustee but until you get half of the people on your side, it won't go anywhere. So you have to work with people whom you may not even care to talk with, with whom you have nothing in common, but with whom you have to work with in order to accomplish what you want. As a politician, learning that when I was a trustee was very useful.

In describing the human relational skills they acquired as a result of their school board experience, other politicians said:

> You learn to work in groups, how to come to decision making, how to share strong ideas...I think it's excellent political experience.

> You become adept at...juxtaposing conflicting roles and dealing with people who may or may not have some opposing view.

Several of the politicians interviewed made specific reference to the skills they acquired in dealing with professional experts. One politician said:

> I learned not to have blind faith in expertise. A lot of teachers, administrators and experts didn't know what they were talking about. I learned a built-in suspicion to the expert as opposed to the common sense approach of people....

Another politician added:

> I learned to be skeptical with experts and with conclusive findings.

All of the politicians expressed the view that they acquired valuable skills in financial matters. Typical of the comments relating to the acquisition of financial skills is the following:

> I learned to be resourceful. How to husband monies and how to zero in on the source of a problem and how to then go about solving it.

The political skills of coalition building, conflict resolution, assessment of expert evidence, and financial management were identified by the politicians as the most valuable skills they acquired as a result of their school board experience. Certain other important political skills that were also acquired but which were mentioned less frequently include skills in chairing meetings, communicating to groups, listening to others, etc.

Another important finding of this study was that school board experience had a politicizing effect on the individuals involved. They found that they liked politics, they could be successful at it, and this interest and success encouraged them to consider running for higher political office. One of the politicians put it succinctly by saying:

> People either become political animals or they don't after serving on a board... I became one in the sense that I enjoyed politics.

Another politician described how success in the school board experience can serve as a stimulus for the seeking of higher political office.

> If you are successful as a trustee you are motivated to go on....If you are successful in improving society in whatever area, then it's only natural that if you see you can contribute in some larger way you will be motivated to continue.

With the exception of one individual, none of the politicians consciously planned to use the school board as a stepping stone to higher political office. The stirring of political ambition came about as a result of the school board experience. One politician described the process as follows:

> Most of the people I know that have come from school boards and (city) councils didn't enter the council or trustee job

> thinking they would run for higher office. I think they sought the job and that was the end to the goal. As they got into it, they enjoyed it and perhaps became popular in their own area, be it in their community or their political party, and saw the opportunity present itself one day to go on. I don't think that people who go out for school board and council really see it as a means to an end. I think they go out to change the world, and are either in the end defeated, drop out, or go on. It's like any other process, there is room to keep on climbing. Any person who is ambitious, when they start on a job, will be aiming for a better job.

Success and a sense of accomplishment in the school board member role was thus of great importance in encouraging these individuals to seek higher public office. Three of the individuals interviewed did not feel, however, that they had accomplished as much as they had wanted. They felt that this was less a function of themselves and more a function of the limited power school boards have. One of the former school board members put it this way:

> My feeling was that when I went in and became a school trustee most of the decisions had already been made by the time they were presented to us at the school board level. The government makes decisions on financing and there is very limited room to move as a trustee. I think somebody once said that fifteen percent of the budget is yours to do whatever you want with, but only if you raise taxes. I don't think that it is a particularly satisfying job.

An examination was also made of the effect that electoral defeat had on the political ambitions of these former school board members. Only two of the ten politicians had ever suffered electoral defeat, and only one had been beaten in a school board election. The effects of defeat tend to be temporary and no real antidote to political ambition. The two defeated politicians in this study described their reaction to defeat as follows:

> ...well, I tangled with some teachers and was defeated the second term. That was it, I had had enough. Later,

> however, I was asked to run for city council and eventually became mayor.
>
> Yes, I lost two elections. I learned a lot by losing. When you understand why you lost, you can do something about it.... It's depressing, but not devastating to lose. You have to understand that most people run to win. You are perhaps depressed for a week or so, but my God, it's only an election!

Finally, an attempt was made to determine whether school board experience made the individuals in this study desirable to political parties as potential federal or provincial candidates. This was a difficult question to sort out as many of the individuals were engaged simultaneously in school board affairs and party affairs at the constituency level. Several of the politicians did indicate, however, that their school board experience was very important in terms of their desirability as a candidate for higher office. One said:

> If I hadn't been an elected official for ten years I'm sure that members of my party would not have approved me to run. A party wants to win and when they are looking for someone, they are looking for someone who is electable.

Another described his experience in these terms:

> I think the fact that I was a school trustee influenced people to ask me to seek further office. I had always been involved in politics, long before I was a school trustee but basically at the party organization level rather than in elected office. Getting elected as a school trustee introduced me to a whole new realm of politics. Then when the former candidate decided not to run again, Tommy Douglas approached me, and the local party president approached me, and I said 'sure I'll make a go for it'.

<u>Discussion</u>. To this point in time researchers have given little attention to school board service as a political experience. What the results of this preliminary study show is that it can be a powerful experience in terms of the acquisition of political attitudes and skills. Regardless of the nature of their earlier political socialization or political recruitment experiences, the

individuals in this study were unanimous in their agreement on the value of the school board experience as a political apprenticeship. They became more politicized as a result of the experience, and in addition, acquired skills which they deemed to be invaluable in their future political careers.

Summary and Implications

This study examined the value of the school board experience as a political apprenticeship for a group of ten politicians who went on to successful careers at the federal or provincial level. These politicians agreed unanimously that school board service was a valuable political experience for them. It was one in which they acquired needed political skills and attitudes. They also acquired a certain desirability as potential candidates for higher public office.

Only one of the ten politicians in this study deliberately set out to build a political career using the school board as a stepping stone. The remainder did not have upward-bound political ambitions at the time they became board members. They simply wanted to be school trustees. Yet during the course of their tenure as board members they had experiences which changed their political ambitions from office-bound ambitions to upward-bound ambitions. This was true regardless of the nature of their prior political socialization or political recruitment experiences.

In this study we examined the school board experiences of individuals who have gone on to higher political office. We also examined their political socialization and political recruitment backgrounds. Most school board members do not go on to higher office. Quite a few try, but most fail. For everyone who serves

on a school board, the experience is, among other things, a political experience. For all the individuals in this study, the experience was useful. For some it was also powerful and mind-expanding. For those board members who do not go on to higher office, or for those who fail in their efforts to do so, the nature of school board service as a political experience may well be different. It may be that their political socialization and political recruitment experiences differ markedly from those of the politicians in this study. Only further research can clarify these issues and our future research efforts will focus on these issues.

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